

Bishop Ricard joins religious leaders for service focusing on hunger

WASHINGTON - Religious leaders, including Bishop John H. Ricard of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., gathered at the Washington National Cathedral June 11 to reaffirm their mutual commitment to end hunger.

Representatives from Islam, Judaism, Christianity and other faiths joined together at the second Interfaith Convocation on Hunger to declare their religions' intent to fight hunger and recruit others to join in the effort.

Bishop Ricard delivered the opening prayer, calling on the nearly 1,000 people present to "make a deeper commitment to ending poverty on our planet."

The need to address this problem of poverty was echoed by religious leaders and anti-hunger activists through songs, readings and talks during the two-hour service.

The Rev. David Beckmann, the president of the Christian anti-hunger group Bread for the World, said he was stunned by the diversity of the top religious leaders present.

He said they have realized that, no matter what their faith, they cannot connect with their God if they walk away from those who are hungry. And because religious leaders have overcome their differences, solving the problem of hunger is within their collective grasp, he said.

"We know that dramatic progress with hunger and poverty is now feasible in the years ahead," Rev. Beckmann said.

The Rev. William J. Shaw, president of the National Baptist Convention USA, was the featured speaker.

Speaking with Catholic News Service after the event, Bishop Ricard said he hopes

an end to poverty and hunger is not far off. Catholics need to be concerned about the problem of hunger, Bishop Ricard said, because “it’s the Gospel mandate.”

“We can’t really call ourselves Christian until we see Christ, especially as he has disguised himself in the faces of the poor and those in need,” he said.

The interfaith service started on the lawn in front of the Episcopal Church’s cathedral. There were songs and some speakers, and then the event moved inside, where the altar was decorated with bushels of oranges, bananas, corn and other fruits and vegetables.

Many speakers touched on the fact that the United States – the richest nation in the world – is still a country where some people go to bed hungry. Imam Mohamed Magid was one of those who pointed out the disparity.

The executive director of the Virginia-based All Dulles Area Muslim Society, Imam Magid told a story about his life as a young man in Sudan. The people were suffering, he said, because it had not rained in a long time. The poor started walking to the capital, Khartoum, looking for food. He heard about the suffering, so went to a refugee camp to help.

“I couldn’t believe what I saw there,” the imam said.

He saw a woman with a small child in her arms, and he smiled at her, but she didn’t smile back. He told her help had arrived. She looked at him and said, “Son, you are late. The baby is half-dead.”

Years later, Imam Magid said, he arrived in the United States, the country that had provided the food for the impoverished refugees in Sudan. He thought it was impossible that a person could live in the United States and also live in poverty, but he realized he was wrong.

Imam Magid made an appeal to the audience at the National Cathedral: “Let us vow to never be late again.”

At the end of the service, Sister Mary Dacey, a Sister of St. Joseph who is president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Rev. Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, and Bishop James C. Richardson,

presiding bishop of the Apostle Church of Christ in God, led a prayer committing those present to ending hunger.

The second Interfaith Convocation on Hunger was organized by Bread for the World and sponsored by the Interfaith Anti-Hunger Coordinators. It was part of a four-day Bread for the World gathering of religious leaders and anti-hunger activists that culminated the day following the interfaith prayer service with a day of lobbying.

The organizers hoped to persuade members of Congress to make changes to the farm bill that would improve the quality of life for the hungry and the poor.

The first Interfaith Convocation on Hunger was held in the National Cathedral in 2005. Bread for the World, which lobbies political leaders to make laws addressing poverty and hunger, and the Interfaith Anti-Hunger Coordinators, a group of Christian and Jewish leaders who coordinate anti-hunger programs, were both involved in creating the first convocation.